
Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849): Cask of Amontillado**I. Biographical timeline**

- 1809: Poe is born in Boston, where his parents, traveling actors Eliza and David Poe, who are performing there.
- 1811: Eliza Poe dies from an illness. David Poe apparently died soon thereafter, and he had probably already abandoned the family at the time of Eliza's death. Poe and his two siblings are taken into different foster homes. Poe is taken into the home of John and Frances Allan, a wealthy family in Richmond Virginia; they never adopted Poe.
- 1815: Allans move to London, where Poe attended school for several years.
- 1820: Allans return to the States.
- 1826: Poe enters the University of Virginia. He studies ancient and modern languages. He gambles, gets into debt, and falls out of favor with his foster father, in part because of his chronic need for money. John Allan refuses to honor debts and Poe leaves school in December and returns to Richmond.
- 1827: Poe and foster father cannot get along; Poe moves to Boston and publishes his first collection of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. Poe enlists in the army under an assumed name and is ordered to Fort Moultrie, South Carolina.
- 1828: Poe rises to rank of sergeant major and gains appointment at West Point Military Academy with the help of foster father. Foster mother dies.
- 1830: Poe enters West Point Military Academy.
- 1831: Poe dislikes military life, disobeys orders deliberately, and is expelled. Before leaving he asks fellow cadets for subscriptions to publish a book of poetry. *Poems* is published in New York City, dedicated to "The US Corps of Cadets." Poe moves to Baltimore. Brother dies.
- 1833: Poe's short story "MS Found in a Bottle" wins first prize in a Baltimore literary contest.
- 1834: John Allan dies, leaving nothing of his large fortune to Poe in his will.
- 1835: Poe moves to Richmond and becomes editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*.
- 1836: Poe marries his cousin, Virginia Clemm, who is 13 years old; he lives with Virginia and her mother thereafter.
- 1837: Poe gets fired from job at *Southern Literary Messenger*.
- 1838: Poe and family move to Philadelphia. Short stories are published in Philadelphia magazines.

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- 1839: Poe becomes editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. Collection of short stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, published.
- 1841: "Murders in the Rue Morgue" published. Poe assumes editorial position at *Graham's Magazine*, a distinguished literary journal based in Philadelphia. Poe continues to publish short stories and poems. A talented magazine writer and editor, Poe always had trouble making a living and had difficulty holding down a steady job. He tended to get into fights with important people, and his employers repeatedly complained that he drank too much. He wrote short stories, poems, and reviews for magazines. He always said he preferred to write poetry and thought it was a superior genre, but regretted the fact that one can't make a living as a poet.
- 1842: "The Pit and the Pendulum" and other stories published in magazines.
- 1843: "The Tell-Tale Heart" and other stories published in magazines.
- 1844: Poe moves family to New York in 1844; works for popular paper *New York Evening Mirror*
- 1845: The publication of "The Raven" in the *Evening Mirror* causes a tremendous sensation and makes Poe famous. He publishes "The Philosophy of Composition," a story of how he wrote "The Raven," soon afterwards. He publishes a collection, *The Raven and Other Poems*, in November. Becomes editor and then owner of *The Broadway Journal*. Publishes and re-publishes many of his poems and short stories in the *Journal*.
- 1846: *The Broadway Journal* can't survive financially, and Poe stops publication. "Cask of Amontillado" published in *Godey's Lady's Book* for November 1846.
- 1847: Poe's wife dies of tuberculosis. Poe has increasing difficulty maintaining stability after her death.
- 1848: Poe becomes engaged to Sarah Helen Whitman after he pledges to stop drinking. About a month later, he breaks his pledge and the engagement is called off.
- 1849: Poe travels to Richmond, encounters childhood sweetheart Elmira Shelton, and apparently becomes engaged. Joins a temperance society and pledges not to drink.
- 1849: In September, Poe leaves Richmond and dies after he is found delirious on a street in Baltimore; there are debates about how he ended up there. He dies without regaining consciousness in a hospital.

II. Notes on the text by T.O. Mabbot from his edition of Poe's *Tales and Sketches*

Title: Amontillado is a very fine light-colored variety of Xeres or Sherry, chiefly from Jerez de Frontera in the south of Spain. For a conjecture regarding Poe's choice of this particular brand for use in his tale see n. 18 below.

1. Woodberry (*Life*, II, 231) characterized Poe's tale as "a tale of Italian vengeance," without further comment (compare n. 27 to "The Pit and the Pendulum," p. 700 above). "Italian vengeance" had for centuries indicated an implacable demand for retribution. This first paragraph of the present tale outlines [page 1264:] the traditionally recognized requirements of that demand. The second sentence suggests that the narrator, Montresor — probably on his deathbed — addresses a father confessor, but Poe's many subtleties have generated endless discussion, by serious readers, of the person or persons addressed, and of Montresor's fundamental motive.

2. Italy was in Poe's day a great center for production of bogus works of art. Montresor's words prove that he was not himself an Italian.

3. Somewhere it has been suggested that Poe conceived the tale during the Carnival season. The Carnival is elaborately celebrated in Italy and France, and, of course, in America as the Mardi Gras, especially at New Orleans and Mobile. But in 1846 Shrove Tuesday fell on February 24, and it is not probable that "The Cask" was written so early in that year. The Carnival in New York the previous year, as described in the *Broadway Journal*, February 22, 1845, consisted merely of a few sideshows and refreshment stands on Broadway and a good deal of sleighing.

4. Note that Montresor has not claimed to be an expert on *Spanish* wines.

5. This name is spelled "Luchresi" (Look-crazy) in the first version. Dedmond, cited in the introduction, thought it represented Hiram Fuller. For the name Luchesi see p. 471, n. 5, above.

6. The difficulty of telling Amontillado from (ordinary) Sherry is mentioned in the 1845 versions of "Lionizing." A pipe is a large cask, containing two hogsheads; note the word in "Apropos of Bores," quoted in the introduction above.

7. The *roquelaine* (*roquelauire*) is a knee-length cloak, mentioned also in "The Man of the Crowd" at n. 12.

8. Compare similar orders to servants in "The Purloined Letter," at n. 6.

9. Médoc (a French wine) is reputedly hygienic, not fatiguing the head or stomach. See Cora, Rose and Bob Brown, *Wine Cook Book* (1934), p. 310. The therapeutic value of Médoc is also alluded to in "Bon-Bon." Commentators unaware of the medicinal value of the wine have been puzzled by Poe's selection. See the *Explicator*, November 1966.

10. The toast is ironic.

11. Fortunate's forgetfulness of Montresor's arms is subtly insulting. (This note is from Sculley Bradley.)

[12.](#) W. M. Forrest (*Biblical Allusions in Poe*) saw a reminiscence of the prophecy of Genesis 3:14-15: “And the Lord God said unto the serpent . . . I will put enmity between thee and the woman . . . and her seed . . . shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

[13.](#) The motto, “No one provokes me with impunity,” is actually the ancient motto of Scotland and that of the Scottish Order of the Thistle. See also on p. 34 above “The Duc de l’Omelette”: “‘Sir!’ replied the Duc, ‘I am not to be insulted with impunity!’” — and a similar declaration in “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.” Poe may have seen the following verses in Carey and Hart’s edition of *The Noctes Ambrosianae of “Blackwood”* (4 v., Philadelphia, 1843, I, 128) or in the magazine itself (December 1822, p. 702): [page 1265:]

“You ask me, kind Hunt, why does Christopher North
For his crest Thistle, Shamrock, and Rose blazon forth?
The answer is easy: his pages disclose
The splendour, the fragrance, the grace of the Rose;
Yet so humble, that he, though of writers the chief,
In modesty vies with the Shamrock’s sweet leaf;
Like the Thistle! — Ah, Leigh, you and I must confess it,
NEMO ME (is his motto) IMPUNE LACESSET.”

These sources spell “laccessit” with an “e” but the “i” is correct.

[14.](#) De Grève or Grâves is the name given wines from a city and region of the Bordeaux district of France, known for its gravelly soil. Most of them are white, but a few are red. The name here may well be chosen for a grim pun on the English word grave. Queen Elizabeth made a jest of this kind according to Bacon’s *Apophthegms* (Spedding edition) 78.(12): “When the Archduke did raise his siege from Grave, the then secretary came to Queen Elizabeth; and the Queen, having intelligence first, said to the secretary, *Wot you what? The Archduke is risen from the Grave.* He answered, *What, without the trumpet of the Archangel?* The Queen replied; *Yes, without sound of trumpet.*”

[15.](#) Poe was not a Mason. The excellent Poe scholar, Dr. Henry Ridgely Evans, a 32° Mason, who was much interested in Continental as well as British and American Masonry, told me he knew of nothing at all like Fortunato’s gesture. That is made up; the trowel is ironic, revealing Montresor as a *practical* mason, rather than a member of a fraternal Masonic lodge.

[16.](#) The catacombs of Paris are not so famous as those of Rome, but they probably are what Poe actually had in mind. [B. Pollin, *Discoveries*, p. 34, quotes a letter on “The Catacombs of Paris” that appeared in the “Editor’s Table” of the *Knickerbocker* for March 1838 that Poe very likely read.] However, efforts to fix the geography of a work of pure fiction do not seem necessary.

[17.](#) Compare the process described in the following paragraphs with Headley’s imaginative account quoted in the introduction above.

[18.](#) Commenting on the many repetitions of the word Amontillado, Professor Charles W. Steele, in the *Explicator*, April 1960, suggested that Poe — who took courses in both Spanish and Italian at the University of Virginia — might have had a pun in mind, since the Italian *ammonticchiato* and the Spanish *amontanado* both in sound remotely resemble the name of the wine and both mean “collected in a heap.” He goes on to say: “The implication of Montresor’s pun can be understood . . . As the climax of the story

is reached he causes his victim to repeat the word *amontillado* (with its inherent play on words) a final time, as if to assure himself that his subtle and superior wit has been fully appreciated . . . The idea of a pun cannot be dismissed. ‘Collected in a heap’ suits very well the pile of bricks revealed at the climax of the story. Poe was an inveterate punster; already a grim pun on ‘mason’ is surely recognizable . . .”

[19](#). The jingling was a knell. Montresor’s heart grew sick at his first murder, but he at once dismissed the twinge of his rudimentary conscience. The last words are also ironic. Fortunato had rested in peace for fifty years; Montresor [page 1266:] must always have feared being found out. This view was taken by Robert H. Fossum in the *Explicator*, November 1958. In the same periodical for November 1961, Dorothy Norris Foote argued that Montresor failed to make clear to his victim the reason for revenge. I accept the idea that Montresor did *not* escape punishment; but Marvell Felheim in the *London Notes and Queries*, October 1954, took the opposite view, as did Vincent Buranelli in his *Edgar Allan Poe* (1961), p. 72. These questions, however, like those mentioned in note 1, will probably always remain moot.

III. Sources for “Cask of Amontillado” (from TO Mabbot’s edition of Poe, *Tales and Sketches*, vol 2):

Poe’s most immediate source for this element of his tale . . . is obviously “A Man Built in a Wall,” by Joel T. Headley, first published in the *Columbian Magazine* for August 1844 — the number containing Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation” — and collected in Headley’s *Letters from Italy* (1845), a book advertised in the *Broadway Journal*, June 28, 1845.† Headley reported that in the Italian town of Don Giovanni, with a party a party of other visitors to the Church of St. Lorenzo, he was shown a niche in the church wall containing a skeleton discovered by workmen some years before [page 1254:] and left undisturbed. “The frame indicates a powerful man,” says Headley,

... and though it is but a skeleton, the whole attitude and aspect give one the impression of a death of agony . . . An English physician was with me, and inured to skeletons as he was, his countenance changed as he gazed on it . . . he made no reply to the repeated questions I put him, but kept gazing, as if in a trance. It was not till after we left that he would speak of it, and then his voice was low and solemn, as if he himself had seen the living burial. Said he, “*That man died by suffocation*, and he was built up alive in that wall . . . He was packed into the rough wall, and built over, beginning at the feet” . . . By the dim light of lamps, whose rays scarcely reached the lofty ceiling, the stones were removed before the eyes of the doomed man, and measurement after measurement taken, to see if the aperture was sufficiently large . . . At length the opening was declared large enough, and he was lifted into it. The workman began at the feet, and with his mortar and trowel built up with the same carelessness he would exhibit in filling any broken wall. The successful enemy stood leaning on his sword — a smile of scorn and revenge on his features — and watched the face of the man he hated, but no longer feared . . . It was slow work fitting the pieces nicely, so as to close up the aperture with precision . . . With care and precision the last stone was fitted in the narrow space — the trowel passed smoothly over it — a stifled groan, as if from the centre of a rock, broke the stillness — one strong shiver, and all was over. The agony had passed — revenge was satisfied, and a secret locked up for the great revelation day.

A more famous story analogous to Poe’s is “La Grande Bretèche” by Honoré de Balzac. This tells of a jealous husband who, learning that his wife’s lover is hidden in a closet, had it walled up in the presence of the lady. An acknowledged adaptation of Balzac’s story appeared in the *Democratic Review*, November 1843.

Another probable source has been pointed out in the story "Apropos of Bores" (*New-York Mirror*, December 2, 1837) "related by the late Joseph Jekyll, Esq." He had attended a party where a gentleman began by request to recount his adventure in the wine-vaults of Lincoln's Inn. Having secured safe cellarage there for several pipes of wine from Madeira, he went with a porter to visit the vast cellars of Lincoln's-Inn-square, twenty feet beneath the square and one hundred and fifty feet from "any dwelling, or populous resort." The pipes stored there were in perfect condition, but an accident occurred, extinguishing the visitors' candle. Groping in the dark, they found the door, but the porter turned the key "with such force that it snapped, the head remaining inextricably [page 1255:] secured in the wards." When the seriousness of their predicament became clear the porter lamented bitterly, but then proposed "Let us stave in one of the wine-pipes . . . that we may forget, in the excitement of wine, the horrible death that awaits us." They decided against this step, but became more and more convinced that "our mortal remains would not be discovered, until every trace of identity was destroyed." The narrator finally remarked, "I seized the arm of my companion, and —"

Here one of the guests at the party, noted for his obtuseness, asked loudly, "How do you think, Jekyll, I should have got out?" "You would have bored your way out, to be sure," Jekyll answered. But at this moment the butler announced that "the ladies were waiting tea for us." Hence Jekyll never learned how the men in the vault escaped, but the story may well have contributed to Poe's underground descriptions

IV. Poe on "unity of effect" Excerpt from a long review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* which originally appeared in *Graham's Magazine*, published in Philadelphia, in May, 1842.]

But it is of his tales that we desire principally to speak. The tale proper, in our opinion, affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose. Were we bidden to say how the highest genius could be most advantageously employed for the best display of its own powers, we should answer, without hesitation--in the composition of a rhymed poem, not to exceed in length what might be perused in an hour. Within this limit alone can the highest order of true poetry exist. We need only here say, upon this topic, that, in almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting. We may continue the reading of a prose composition, from the very nature of prose itself, much longer than we can persevere, to any good purpose, in the perusal of a poem. This latter, if truly fulfilling the demands of the poetic sentiment, induces an exaltation of the soul which cannot be long sustained. All high excitements are necessarily transient. Thus a long poem is a paradox. And, without unity of impression, the deepest effects cannot be brought about. Epics were the offspring of an imperfect sense of Art, and their reign is no more. A poem *too* brief may produce a vivid, but never an intense or enduring impression. Without a certain continuity of effort--without a certain duration or repetition of purpose--the soul is never deeply moved. There must be the dropping of the water upon the rock. De Béranger has wrought brilliant things--pungent and spirit-stirring--but, like all immassive bodies, they lack momentum, and thus fail to satisfy the Poetic Sentiment. They sparkle and excite, but, from want of continuity, fail deeply to impress. Extreme brevity will degenerate into epigrammatism; but the sin of extreme length is even more unpardonable. *In medio tutissimus ibis.*

Were we called upon however to designate that class of composition which, next to such a poem as we have suggested, should best fulfill the demands of high genius--should offer it the most advantageous field of exertion--we should unhesitatingly speak of the prose tale, as Mr. Hawthorne has here exemplified it. We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its

perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences--resulting from weariness or interruption.

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents--he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

We have said that the tale has a point of superiority even over the poem. In fact, while the *rhythm* of this latter is an essential aid in the development of the poem's highest idea--the idea of the Beautiful--the artificialities of this rhythm are an inseparable bar to the development of all points of thought or expression which have their basis in *Truth*. But Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale. Some of the finest tales are tales of ratiocination. Thus the field of this species of composition, if not in so elevated a region on the mountain of Mind, is a table-land of far vaster extent than the domain of the mere poem. Its products are never so rich, but infinitely more numerous, and more appreciable by the mass of mankind. The writer of the prose tale, in short, may bring to his theme a vast variety of modes or inflections of thought and expression--(the ratiocinative, for example, the sarcastic or the humorous) which are not only antagonistical to the nature of the poem, but absolutely forbidden by one of its most peculiar and indispensable adjuncts; we allude of course, to rhythm. It may be added, here, *par parenthèse*, that the author who aims at the purely beautiful in a prose tale is laboring at great disadvantage. For Beauty can be better treated in the poem. Not so with terror, or passion, or horror, or a multitude of such other points. And here it will be seen how full of prejudice are the usual animadversions against those *tales of effect* many fine examples of which were found in the earlier numbers of Blackwood. The impressions produced were wrought in a legitimate sphere of action, and constituted a legitimate although sometimes an exaggerated interest. They were relished by every man of genius: although there were found many men of genius who condemned them without just ground. The true critic will but demand that the design intended be accomplished, to the fullest extent, by the means most advantageously applicable.

V. Contexts

A. From George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, the Monks of Monk Hall* (1844)

[Poe's friend George Lippard was an eccentric writer based in Philadelphia. His Gothic novel *The Quaker City* was enormously popular, selling more than 60,000 copies. It was based on a well known local murder case. In the story a sadistic criminal named "Devil Bug" runs a club that commits crimes and tortures people in an unused monastery.

But the Pit, the Pit of Monk-Hall, ha, ha ! He shudders at the name, he starts and grows pale. The Phantom of the murdered man he can endure as he has endured for years ! But to go down step by step into the lowest deep of the pest-house, to stand in the nethermost cavern of Monk-Hall, for the first time for many long years, to start with fear at the palpable presence of the bare skull and mouldering bones of the murdered man ! Ho, ho ! This were a hard trial, even for Devil-Bug's strong nerves and strong heart ! But down, down into the pit he will go ; down, down, with the form of his intended victim on his shoulder and the lamp held firmly in his talon fingers ; down, down, until the air grows thick with the breath of corruption, and the light flashes in its socket as it dies away under the pressure of an atmosphere, never yet enlivened by a single ray of God's sunlight, but rendered fatal and deathly by the decay of the human corpse, as it crumbles to dust, with the worms revelling over its rottenness, and the thick night shrouding it like a pall.

B. Premature Burial. From Joseph Taylor, *The Dangers of Premature Interment* (1816)

A Director of the coach office at Dijon, named Colinet, was supposed to be dead, and the news of this event was spread throughout the whole city. One of his friends, who was desirous of seeing him at the moment when he was about to be buried, having looked at him for a considerable time, thought he perceived some remains of sensibility in the muscles of the face. He therefore made an attempt to bring him to life by spirituous liquors, in which he succeeded ; and this director enjoyed afterwards, for a long time, that life which he owed to his friend. This remarkable circumstance was much like those of Empedocles and Asclepiades* These instances would perhaps be more frequent, were men of skill and abilities called in cases of sudden death, in which people of ordinary knowledge are often deceived by false appearances. A man may fall into a syncope, and may remain in that condition three, or even eight days. People in this situation have been known to come to life when deposited among the dead.

C. The Gothic tradition: From "Monk" Lewis, *The Monk* (1796)

Thunderstruck at this barbarous decree, my little remaining strength abandoned me. I answered only by falling at her feet, and bathing them with tears. The Domina, unmoved by my affliction, rose from her seat with a stately air. She repeated her commands in an absolute tone: But my excessive faintness made me unable to obey her. Mariana and Alix raised me from the ground, and carried me forwards in their arms. The Prioress moved on, leaning upon Violante, and Camilla preceded her with a Torch. Thus passed our sad procession along the passages, in silence only broken by my sighs and groans. We stopped before the principal shrine of St. Clare. The Statue was removed from its Pedestal, though how I knew not. The Nuns afterwards raised an iron grate till then concealed by the Image, and let it fall on the other side with a loud crash. The awful sound, repeated by the vaults above, and Caverns below me, roused me from the despondent apathy in which I had been plunged. I looked before me: An abyss presented itself to my affrighted eyes, and a steep and narrow Staircase, whither my Conductors were leading me. I shrieked, and started back. I implored compassion, rent the air with my cries, and summoned both heaven and earth to my assistance. In vain! I was hurried down the Staircase, and forced into one of the Cells which lined the Cavern's sides. My blood ran cold, as I gazed upon this melancholy abode. The cold vapours hovering in the air, the walls green with damp, the bed of Straw so forlorn and comfortless, the Chain destined to bind me for ever to my prison, and the Reptiles of every description which as the torches advanced towards them, I descried hurrying to their retreats, struck my heart with terrors almost too exquisite for nature to bear. Driven by despair to madness, I burst suddenly from the Nuns who held me: I threw myself upon my knees before the Prioress, and besought her mercy in the most passionate and frantic terms.